

Parkland College

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Honors Program

2011

An Exploration of the Creature Archetype

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Recommended Citation

Hastings, Sidney, "An Exploration of the Creature Archetype" (2011). *A with Honors Projects*. 29.
<http://spark.parkland.edu/ah/29>

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Acting II

10 May 2011

An Exploration of the Creature Archetype

At the beginning of the semester, when searching for pieces to perform as part of the Acting II curriculum, I came across a significantly long monologue from *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Shelley, which was a dramatic and powerful compilation of the Creature's lines. Realizing it had been a long while since I had opened the book, and curious as to what some of the particulars of the plot were, I decided to analyze the book and the perception of the "Creature," the archetype qualities it possessed, and decide, throughout the course of the novel, what causes the "monster" to be the monster, and who truly is the monster? But I needed something to compare it to, something more modern that may take on a different view of the "monster archetype," and present it in a similar but new light. *Las Meninas*, a much more recent play written by Lynn Nottage, proved to be the ideal work of literature to compare and contrast to, where the similar concepts of "good and evil," prosecution and despair are very visible. The goal of this project was to delve deeper into literature – taking the book, being the book-reader that I was and am, and taking the play, which I am much newer at reading and analyzing – and to use my new-found knowledge of interpretation to combine different ways of telling a story revolving around the "creature" or "monster" archetype and combining all of this into one, coherent output, paper, and performance.

As I interpret what is called the creature/monster archetype, it is typically, classically, a character presented in a work of literature that has some sort of physical deformity that renders them a)

unapproachable in their monstrosity or b) unable to take seriously, a victim of discrimination. Usually it is both a and b. This character may or may not have wickedness within their heart, but if they do not, they are at least perceived as being wicked, or lesser of a being, because of this appearance. In most of cases, this character is susceptible to a world of misunderstanding, ridicule, solitude, despair, and the like. Examples of other iconic characters with this creature/monster archetype would be the beast, from *Beauty and the Beast*, or the phantom from *Phantom of the Opera*. Each of these characters possesses physical traits that are “out of the ordinary” which puts them out of place in “normal society.” The level of misunderstanding, especially in the case of the phantom, that he receives, causes him to commit violent or selfish or horrible acts, and in the case of the beast, his unapproachable appearance has made him cold and unfriendly over the years. As both of these stories go, romance is involved with a beautiful, young woman --this drives them to either positive or negative output, causing a change of heart, or a further descent into madness. In *Frankenstein*, this character archetype is expressed through, in the Creature’s case, physical abnormalities and deformities that cause the citizens of the various places it travels to have visceral reactions to it, where they try to shoot or kill it, even when it has committed a good deed – this constant rejection, and denial of love or happiness, drives it into hatred and violence. In the case of Nabo, in *Las Meninas*, he is an African dwarf from Dahomey who is shipped to Louis XIV’s kingdom and is expected to be the fool. His color, physical anomaly, and social status make him the subject of ridicule, discrimination, and he, too, is denied happiness; he is eventually, over the course of the play and the scandal that ensues (which I will get into momentarily), sentenced to death. In *Frankenstein*, I see a more black-and-white view of who the “monster” really is, but in *Las Meninas*, it is much greyer.

To summarize the stories of each, *Frankenstein* tells the story of Victor Frankenstein, an ambitious young fellow from Geneva, who becomes very interested in natural philosophy, science, chemistry, and, upon examining the causes of life; he becomes interested in death, “observing the

natural decay and corruption of the human body (Shelley 45).” He spends time in charnel houses and vaults, cemeteries, examining the decay, thinking that if life becomes death, then perhaps death can, in turn, become life. And then one day he claims to have found the secret to reanimation, and he becomes set upon building a human and resurrecting it. He spends days, weeks, months, even a year, I believe, on perfecting his experiment, tending to his study and “human” like it is a child. Such love and excitement, ambition and desire he injects into his work, his Creature... until, of course, he actually brings it to life. Upon the first grunt of this 8-foot-tall being, Frankenstein flees in disgust, and abandons his “son.” He goes a long while without seeing this creature, assuming, hoping it to be dead, until, upon almost returning home, his dearest Elizabeth writes to say that their younger brother, William, has died, and one of their caretakers has been charged with his murder. Thus begins the spiral into more murders as Frankenstein’s guilt increases and he learns the story of his Creature and its own misery, and its demand for an equal, a female. Frankenstein denies his Creature, condemns it, and eventually this guilt-struck man meets his own demise.

In *Las Meninas*, as stated, Nabo Sensugali, an African dwarf from Dahomey, is shipped to the kingdom in a small box and given as a gift to the Queen Marie-Therese. Nabo is an intelligent man but is taken as being “cute” by the queen because of his small stature, and he is expected to entertain and serve the unjust rulers. He is expected to follow orders. Being alone, he eventually has a love affair which causes much scandal, and he ends up being executed for it, because of his skin, his size, and his place in society – basically, he doesn’t have a place in the royal court. He is the “classic” example of the creature archetype, but here is the twist: the romance he pursues is with the Queen Marie-Therese. In the first scene of the play, it is learned that she, too, while being the queen of France, is technically from Spain (and was married to create peace), and does not fit in with the whole of the court. She has poor habits – she is loud, obnoxious, eats too much candy and has bad teeth, and in the eyes of much of the court, she, too, is seen as a monster, a creature, thus creating the “grey area” of the play. The queen

mysteriously becomes pregnant, and in the end, the child is born with dark skin – Nabo is the father, which is what causes him to be executed, by the order of the king, who claims he must also protect the queen’s reputation, blaming it entirely on Nabo. The child is sent to a convent and doesn’t learn of her heritage until she is a young adult – she serves as the narrator of the story, as well. In the end, Nabo is dead, the child is sent to the convent, “disappearing” forever, and the Queen goes mad.

As earlier stated, the concept of the “monster” is clearly established in *Frankenstein* – based on the appearance of the Creature and the reactions of the other characters, it is it that is the beast. Upon seeing his creation move, Frankenstein becomes abhorred by it, fleeing his workspace and leaving the beast to rot, or otherwise – in the moment of disgust, he does not care what becomes of it. With scraggly hair and yellowing skin that barely stretches muscle and bone, it causes villagers to run screaming or try to kill it because of its foul state. Even in its “young” days, before it understands its senses, language, manners, and life, it innocently tries to find a human connection, but gains nothing. With the passing of the years and the acquiring of a conscience, of intelligent speech and kindness, upon receiving final bouts of hatred and rejection, it turns over a new leaf, paving that path for destructive and vengeful behavior. It is society that has made the Creature who it was, making its personality fit the gruesome skin it wears. In the story, Victor Frankenstein has had not a kind thought about the creature since before it breathed – he refers to it as a monster, a wretch, a filthy daemon, never giving it the chance because of its gruesomeness and believes it to be evil from the start – but this is not true.

The Creature is a pleasant thing, at first, and suffers from being alone; it is an 8-foot child that must be nurtured like any other being, and while all of the characters view it as evil, but I do not. After killing William, one of Frankenstein’s brothers, the characters meet, the Creature having the hopes that its creator will make him a female so that it, too, can have some kind of connection. Upon the refusal, the Creature vows to be with Frankenstein on his wedding night, with the intentions to destroy his life

and what he holds dearest to him – his beloved Elizabeth. Upon killing Elizabeth, the Creature flees, and Frankenstein begins trying to follow him, having nothing left. All the while, there are pages upon pages of Frankenstein “feeling despair” and the like over his creation, but he does not ever seem to entirely blame himself for the travesty the Creature causes. It is easy for him to blame the ugly thing, having it take on a life of its own. In the end, it is entirely Frankenstein’s fault for this ordeal – he may have been better off giving the Creature an “other.” His blame continues through to his very last words, where, basically, he expresses, that he was justified in his hatred for the Creature. He created a rational creature and needed to ensure his happiness and well- being, but he had “more important” matters to attend to, and denied the Creature an “other,” and the Creature reacted inappropriately and exhibited selfishness, destroying Frankenstein’s friends, “devoted to destruction beings who possessed exquisite sensations (Shelley 237),” etc. But I still find him not blaming himself – he views himself, his possessions, and his family as higher than this “son” he created, thus fulfilling the Creature’s place as the loathed creature archetype. The Creature is persecuted through hate and solitude – but he is not technically the one to blame. The author may have been using the Creature as a metaphor for all things “normal” people find “abnormal” and reject, expressing the unfathomable amount of discrimination a “monster,” or perhaps a minority, could receive, but the concept of the creature archetype is, again, clearly stated. Frankenstein = good; Creature = bad.

The “grey matter” of *Las Meninas* makes it one of the most compelling plays I have read, where for the most part, Nabo and the queen are the prime examples of perceptions of good and evil and “monsters,” but the other characters serve as secondary resources to the “grey,” as well. In the first scene, Nabo emerges from the box dressed like a french nobleman – dolled up like a toy, and the queen treats him as such, exhibited after witty exchanges with the king that could provide a laugh or two for the audience, but show an underlying *creature* case. But the queen is queen; she is allowed to treat Nabo, the classic example of the creature, as she wishes. His short stature makes the court treat him as

though he is sub-human – an item for entertainment, which is part b of the archetype which I explained on page 2, where one is misunderstood. His physical difference does not render him unapproachable, just unable to be approached with seriousness. He attempts to claim ownership of himself, a declaration of his own rights and importance (comparable to the creature speaking about desiring an equal in the sense that everyone deserves to be loved, to have someone), but it is laughed off. This is a rejection, as the Creature's rejected of true human connection.

When the king leaves the room, Queen Marie-Therese continues to try to exert her dominance over him, and here, it is, as stated, learned that she is not as smart as Nabo. She tries to change his name, to which he replies, "But that implies that at some point I relinquished my own will, which I have not. And therefore I belong to no one, unless that someone is me (Nottage 12)." When she asks him if he finds her beautiful, he states that "As Queen, you define what beauty is and by that standard, I imagine that yes, you are." These comments play upon the "don't judge a book by its cover," cliché (looks are not everything), where he humorously tries to deny his subordination – and in truth, he is not subordinate – it is only because of the perception of royalty (Frankenstein = comparable to royalty and Creature = comparable to Nabo) that the court views him as such. In the more "classic" view of the queen, she would be portrayed as a more elegant figure, but making her be disgusting (not more so than Nabo because he is not disgusting, just different) could be comparable to the metaphor which I expressed in regards to Frankenstein on page 5, where discrimination is present. Those disgusting habits could be examples of the "ugliness" we perceive about ourselves, and still, our sometimes fervid desire to show dominance over others, over a "minority." (In this case, "our" does not refer to everyone, but just, the "majority.") Weakness is soon shown in the queen when she opens up to Nabo, and they share secrets – a change of is starting to develop, where she sees something in Nabo she sees in herself, and the other way around, making him less of a monster or her more so. I like to think it is

the former. Here, the “grey” of the matter emerges, making the King more of the *Frankenstein* in the play.

Throughout the remainder of the first act, the queen suffers further rejection from the king (in the bedroom, even – the Creature desired closeness – what does it do to a person’s psyche when being rejected in the bedroom for being disgusting?), just as Nabo was rejected his rights by being sent over in the box, just as the Creature was denied its rights for acceptance and love. The king would rather sleep with La Valliere, his beautiful mistress. The queen awakens Nabo and bothers him, falling asleep on his bed – here, the “monster” bounces to the queen, because Nabo is, in a way, trying to reject her by getting her to go back to bed. The queen is desperate for attention, going to extremes to get it (comparable to the Creature finally killing in desperation if he does not get what he wants). When she falls asleep on his bed, he contemplates suffocating her but does not – showing he is a peaceful creature and the “monster” is not always malevolent. The next day, the queen brings Nabo around again like a toy – “creature” bouncing back and forth between them, to expound, in the sense that, even though in many eyes, the queen is a monster, HE is still the servant, the small one, expected to perform both day and night. In desperation at the end of the act, after further rejection from the king, who cancels an entire trip to spend with La Valliere (she could be comparable to the “normal” of society, which he would rather spend time with), the queen softens up to Nabo, acting less as royalty and more as just a...person. He expresses his concern for her and the act concludes with the beginning of their affair. They kiss – and so, the classic creature and the royalty (normal of society) make peace, something that was unfortunately not achieved in *Frankenstein*.

In the start of the second act, the queen is desperately trying to hide her pregnant belly, by ordering the servants to pull her corset tighter and tighter. She needs to get into a dress so that she and the king can match at a costumed ball; she wishes to be connected to him, still connected to “normal” of

society. I believe that she already knows she is pregnant with Nabo's baby and perhaps feels ashamed of it, which is why she does not want the king to find out. She does not want to be seen as a monster. Meanwhile, the royal painter of the court shares the news with Nabo – the painter has somehow found out, and I am sure that Nabo knows the child is going to be his. He hides his connections with the queen by saying he is always performing for the king, and he defends her when the painter makes fun of her (I immediately saw this as a comparison to the Creature being a naturally benevolent being until being corrupted). As the act progresses, the tragedy is beginning to unfold – time is running out when it is apparent that the queen will not be able to hide her pregnancy, until it is finally revealed to the king, who finds something suspicious about it. Nabo's demeanor is beginning to change, as well. When next they meet, the queen's attitude towards Nabo is again changed, reflecting the more classic creature-human relationship, where he must serve her to her every whim. The battle, I see, between who is being perceived as the monster and who is not, is a struggle. She bounces back and forth between trying to put him in his place, and confessing her own insecurities.

Time skips forward to the day she gives birth, and upon the moment the doctor holds the baby, the members of the court burst out into laughter – the child is “brown,” a monstrosity. They take the child away and here, the king is similar to Frankenstein in the sense of his behavior. Frankenstein considers himself without blame, the master, as does the king. Without taking the queen's emotions into consideration, he orders the child to be sent away – denying her love. Denying her a gift because it is not “normal.” Because it is tainted with “monster.” He convinces himself the child is dead – as Frankenstein convinces himself he is without blame and it is the Creature's fault. Nabo and the queen share a final moment – the (perhaps tainted) love between two “normals,” two “monsters,” – one in high society and one out. Here, Nabo leaves the queen, and the classic “normal” suffers from the tragedy of being alone, just as Frankenstein lost his new wife. The climactic despair is similar in these stories. In a dramatic conclusion, the king's guards drag Nabo away, as he is to be executed, blamed

entirely for this affair, as I see it. Nabu, the classic creature, is tossed aside as if he is sub-human, in the end, denied his life as the Creature was denied his love.

It was interesting to take two different sorts of literature and see the similarities within them, in a sort of “open-disussion” interpretation. *Las Meninas*, being strictly dialogue – shorter exchanges of lines, and *Frankenstein*, a first-person narrative. In the end what I wanted to achieve was a better understanding of interpretation of characters, being a (hopefully) aspiring playwright myself, who first wrote books. I find myself successful of this. The concept of the creature archetype is something that is definitely changing – from the black and white of *Frankenstein* to the grey of more contemporary literature. The similarities show a gradual evolution of archetype, making me curious as to how else characters can be expressed through the creature archetype. In the beginning I was also curious as to why we continued to have these sorts of characters in literature – if they are ugly and sometimes revolting, why is it still entertaining? What is it that we see in them? I suggest it is ourselves. *Las Meninas* tells the tragic story of two lovers who found each other in desperation but were unable to be together due to differences – to their own “creature” qualities. *Frankenstein* tells the story of a creature, a child, abandoned and expected to survive on his own, eventually turning to violence and hate to avenge his dead innocence. We have all been in situations where we feel like “monsters,” haven’t we? These characters provide us something to connect to – while we feel alone and the characters feel alone, it is still a connection, because at least we are alone together. These characters provide us with something that sympathizes with us, but typically on a more extreme level. And with these characters we can also see what it is we might be doing on the other side of the spectrum -- how are we persecuting the “monster?”

Works Cited

Nottage, Lynn. *Las Meninas*. New York: Dramatist Play Service, 2002. Print.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*. London: Oxford U.P., 1969. Print.

These were the selections chosen and performed during the Acting II Final on Tuesday night, May 10th:

Las Meninas –Lynn Nottage

Selected sections:

NABO : The gallows? It's so large a punishment for one so small. If you factor in my height, I'm one-half the size of an average man and therefore I've committed only half the crime. Sire, you could always exile me to a far-off land, like Africa. Is it necessary to take a man's life twice? You've taken mine once already when I entered this court, which means I'm already dead and therefore your judgment has been enacted. Can a dead man be killed, and if so by what means? Redundancy is not a kingly trait. And if we never had this conversation, is it possible that I never existed? The Queen never did give birth, which means she has no child, which means no crime has been committed. I see. So you signed me out of existence and tomorrow I will never have been here. I gave a woman a few moments of love. I should be thanked for that. I was shipped to and from empires bizarre and unwelcoming in a box no full-size man could survive. Bought, sold, bartered and brokered until I do not know who I am. Laughed at, kicked, and disgraced, I've learned more than most men about this human race. And if my tongue were acid you'd now be dead. I've made kings weep with joy and queens whine with delight. Months of pleasure I've given your court, and I am to pay for the one moment I stole for my own.

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus – Mary Shelley

Selected sections:

CREATURE: All men hated the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends. I entreat you to hear me, before you give vent to your hatred on my devoted head. Have I not suffered enough that you seek to increase my misery? Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it. Thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine; my joints more supple. But I will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee. I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy or no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.